

EXCALIBUR

Soon after King Arthur had set up his new court at Camelot, he heard tales of a fearsome knight who was living in the forest nearby. He was the one known as the Black Knight, and was one of the strongest men in the land. He had been challenging knights as they passed through the forest and had defeated them all in battle — some had even been killed!

King Arthur decided to seek justice for the knights of his court, so he put on his armour and rode into the forest. With him he took Merlin, who was the wisest enchanter in all the land.

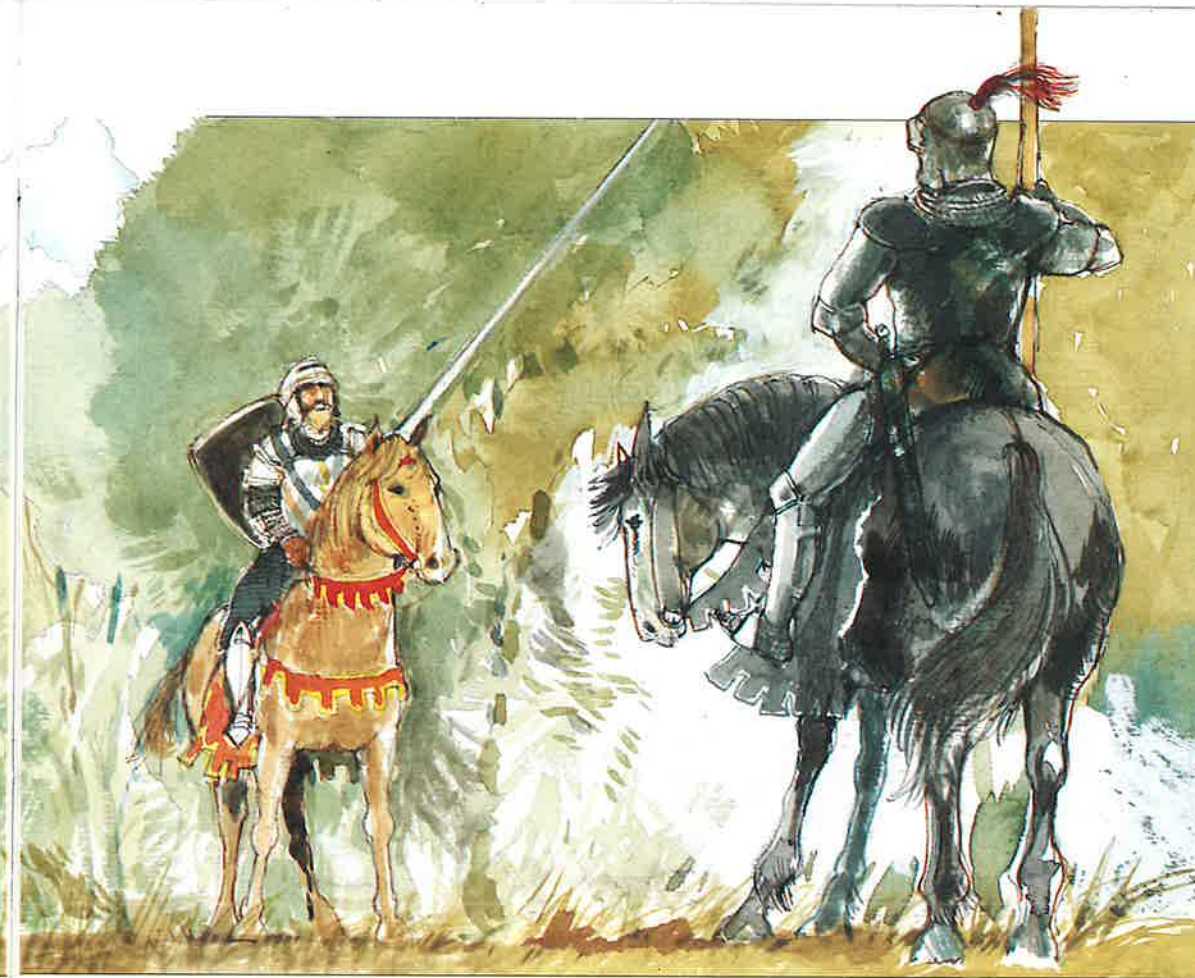
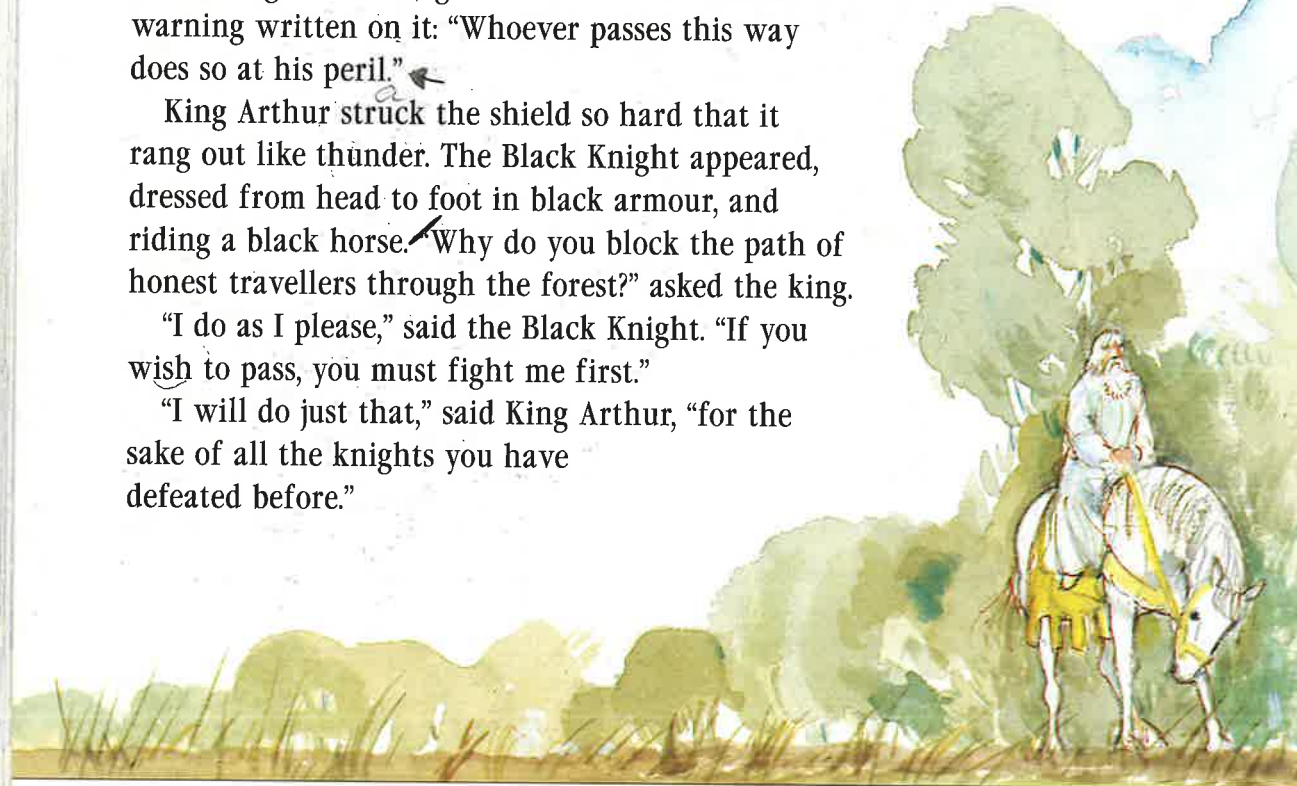


They came to a clearing in the forest where the Black Knight had hung a shield from a tree. It had a warning written on it: "Whoever passes this way does so at his peril."

King Arthur struck the shield so hard that it rang out like thunder. The Black Knight appeared, dressed from head to foot in black armour, and riding a black horse. "Why do you block the path of honest travellers through the forest?" asked the king.

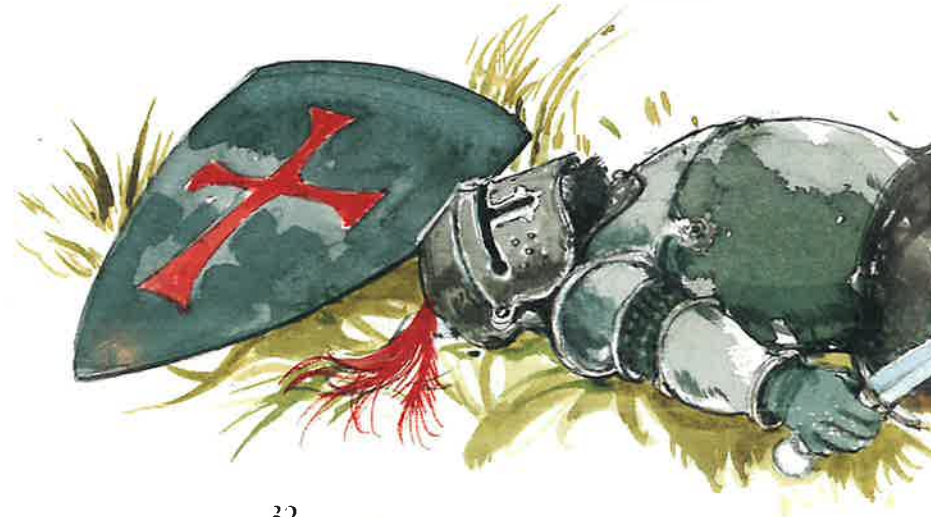
"I do as I please," said the Black Knight. "If you wish to pass, you must fight me first."

"I will do just that," said King Arthur, "for the sake of all the knights you have defeated before."





The two men turned around, then rode towards each other at an incredible speed. As they collided, their lances broke in two, and they were both thrown to the ground. They drew their swords and continued to fight. The battle went on for a long time, until Arthur struck the Black Knight's sword so fiercely that his own sword broke in two! Seeing King Arthur defenceless, and about to be overcome



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by the Black Knight, Merlin decided it was time to take action! He put a spell on the Black Knight, who instantly fell into a deep sleep.

"What have you done, Merlin?" asked the king. "Have you killed the Black Knight with your magic?"

"He is only sleeping, my lord," said Merlin. "The kingdom should not lose its king in a battle like this. Come with me."



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Merlin took Arthur to visit an old man who lived deep in the forest. The old man knew of secret potions, which he used to heal Arthur's wounds from the battle. Arthur was worried that he no longer had a sword to defend himself with, but Merlin told him not to worry. "Soon you will have a sword unlike any other," he said. ←

Merlin was able to make powerful magic, but he knew there were fairies who could make even stronger magic than his own, and he was taking Arthur to seek their help. Soon they arrived at the edge of a shimmering blue lake. Arthur did not understand why Merlin had brought him there and thought it very strange.



As Arthur stood gazing out across the lake, he suddenly saw an incredible sight. Rising out of the middle of the lake was an arm draped in smooth, white silk, holding a gleaming sword.

"That is Excalibur," said Merlin, "the sword that I told you about. The Lady of the Lake will give it to you."



As they watched, a beautiful lady rose out of the lake and walked across the water towards them. Her hair was as red as fire, and her blue eyes sparkled like the glittering lake.



"The Lady of the Lake lives beneath the water in a beautiful palace. She will tell you how to reach the sword," said Merlin.

The lady approached and bowed low before King Arthur.

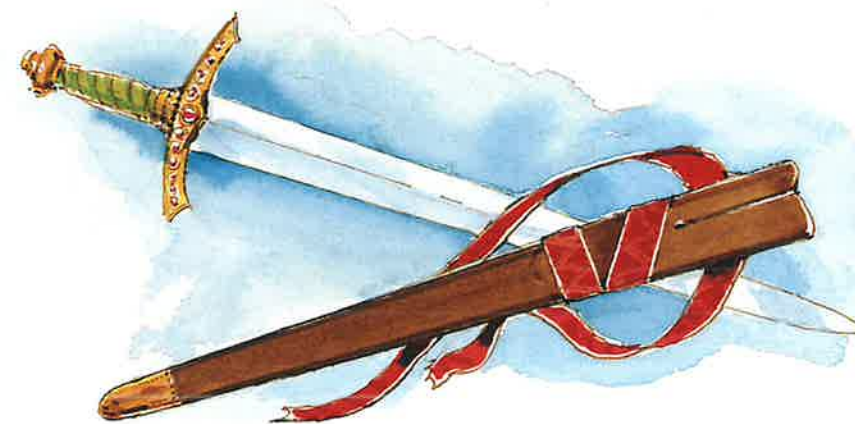
"I am the Lady of the Lake. I have guarded your sword, Excalibur, for many years. This boat will carry you to the middle of the lake where you may claim the sword."

Seeing a boat gliding across the lake towards him, Arthur stepped into it as it reached the shore, and it at once turned and sailed to the middle of the lake. Arthur reached out and took the sword, and the outstretched arm slipped slowly back into the water. The boat turned once more, and took Arthur back to the shore where the beautiful Lady of the Lake had stood. But she too had vanished. Arthur leapt from the boat and showed Merlin the sword.

"Which do you like best?" asked Merlin. "The sword or the scabbard that holds it?"

"I like the sword, of course," said King Arthur.

"That is not a wise choice," said Merlin. "The scabbard is worth ten of the swords, for while you are wearing it, you will never lose a drop of blood. Be sure to keep it with you always."



Arthur assured his friend that he would. Then he mounted his horse and galloped back to where he had left the Black Knight, who awoke at once, and the battle began again. Now that Arthur had Excalibur, however, he soon won the fight.

The Black Knight fell to his knees in front of the king and asked him to spare his life. King Arthur agreed to spare him, and as he had fought so bravely, he offered to welcome him and his sons to the court at Camelot. King Arthur and the Black Knight made their peace, and the Black Knight and his sons served the king well, becoming some of the bravest knights in the land. ←

